

November 2016

Catching Eyes



Last April I decided that I wouldn't let my summer go to waste. This thought wasn't anything new; it's something that crosses my mind every year, a never-ending ritual. This vacation, I reassure myself, is going to be eventful. These next few weeks I will be productive—I'll go to bed early in order to start the next day off with 9 hours of sleep, go on morning runs, cook myself healthy meals, read one book per week, meet up with old friends, go on outings with my sister, challenge myself to learn German, start writing a novel... The list will go on, becoming more ambitious as it further progresses. As far as I can tell, in that moment, anything and everything is possible; I will come out of those 10 weeks radiant and fulfilled.

Because, without fail, this plan falls apart within the first week, I signed myself up for classes this year. This way I had obligations I was required to attend to and backing out wasn't an option. My life would have structure again, I wouldn't be holed up in my bedroom binge watching shows, and I would have a purpose. Sure enough, it worked. Monday through Thursday my alarm went off at 5:59AM, I would leave home at 6:30; take the bus the train station at 7AM only to arrive in San Francisco in time for my class at 8:20. Despite not being a morning person, I enjoyed the commute—shocking, I know. I liked seeing everybody in their work attire, slack jawed, heads nodding off to sleep, only to mechanically get off at their stop, their movement systematic. I would watch people *not* talk to each other, avoid eye contact, and refresh their Twitter feed for the 5th time in a minute, going through the monotonous components of their life.

Of the classes I attended, the one I spent the most time working on was titled 'Documentary Photography'. With an emphasis placed upon photography as a storytelling method, a majority of the assignments were focused on how to instill emotion in an audience with detail rather than technique. The most challenging and ultimately the most rewarding assignment was one in which we were instructed to photograph strangers. The catch was that they were supposed to be portraits, with our subjects fully aware that we were taking their picture. This meant that photographing an old couple holding hands from across the park with a telephoto lens was out of the option; human interaction would therefore be essential.

With the assignment in mind, I ventured out to Union Square, hoping to stumble upon unsuspecting tourists. It was 10AM, but the area surrounding the shopping centers was deserted, the few people present were bundled up on park benches, morning coffee in hand. Not wanting to disturb the peace, I stood at the entrance of the square, camera in hand, as the towering buildings closed in on me. Going through the settings on my camera and photographing pigeons as a distraction, I felt the weight of time pushing me forward onto the scene. Pacing back and forth, I observed families and friends interact with each other, going through the introduction I had rehearsed. All I could think about was how I would approach them and how they would perceive me. Would they agree to be photographed by a complete stranger? What if they said no? How would I recover from the rejection without taking it personally? Plagued with insecurities, composition and the elements of design were the least of my concerns.

When I finally narrowed in on a couple, a man and a woman sitting on the steps, I felt like a telemarketer, trying maintaining a friendly persona, all the while having an ulterior motive.

As I snapped one picture after the other, I felt lost, as if the camera were a foreign contraption. Feeling like an amateur disguised as an enthusiast, I couldn't help but feel like I was deliberately lying to them and deceiving them into thinking that I knew what I was doing.

Maintaining that air of sophistication, I tried getting as many angles as I could, all the while

trying to converse with them so they too wouldn't feel awkward as the center of attention.

Standing ridiculously still, a smile was pasted onto their faces, failing to mask their discomfort.

As I finished up, I lingered, trying to engage them in further conversation. The only information I managed to squeeze out of them was that they were visiting the US for the first time from Switzerland; they barely spoke English. Before leaving, I asked for their contact information so I could send them the final edits. With a weight lifted off my shoulders, we parted ways with a smile. Having expected the encounter to be disastrous, it was surprisingly pleasant in the strangest of ways. This boosted my confidence as I continued on my venture to find innocent prey I could photograph.

When we were initially given the assignment, I played out various scenarios in my head, trying to calm my nerves, but there's no way I could have prepared myself for the unexpected. In class the teacher had previously mentioned that tourists are often eager to get their picture taken because they want to capture the essence of their travels, which is why I chose to exclusively photograph foreigners. I was hoping this would be an advantage because they were on my grounds; I had the superior advantage. I thought that maybe in exchange for letting me take their picture I could give them directions or engage them in a friendly conversation— give them a chance to interact with a 'local'.

As I scanned Union Square, I frantically scoured the scene for diversity, relentlessly thin slicing prospective subjects. San Francisco welcomes people from all walks of life so I wanted to capture that. On top of that, I wanted someone friendly that I could easily interact with. This came to play a huge factor as to whom I would approach.

In *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell claims, “We have, as human beings, a storytelling problem. We're a bit too quick to come up with explanations for things we don't really have an explanation for” (69). Do I know why I was drawn to certain people? Not really. As the faces I scanned melted into one another, all I could base my judgment on were physical features and how that person behaved in the public space they occupied. The one thing we had in common was our location and the fact that neither one of us knew the other. This was quite a contrast from the train ride in which nobody talked to one another; I was breaking a wall of silence, which surprised not only me, but the person I was approaching as well.

Gretchen Rubin is a New York Times bestseller that writes about building good habits and a happier life. In an article titled “Want to Make Friends? Eight Tips for Making Yourself Likable,” Rubin elaborates on how different types of behaviors affect a person’s first impressions. The first piece of advice she gives her readers to be perceived as more approachable is to smile. A tool that can be used to ease people into conversation, smiling is a simple action

that can soften up one's features, open up one's face, and directly impact how friendly you're calculated to be. According to "There's Magic In Your Smile. How Smiling Affects Your Brain", a piece featured on Psychology Today, smiling said to be contagious and leads people to believe a person is more "attractive, reliable, relaxed and sincere". The article continues by claiming that

A study published in the journal *Neuropsychologia* reported that seeing an attractive smiling face activates your orbitofrontal cortex, the region in your brain that process sensory rewards. This suggests that when you view a person smiling, you actually feel rewarded. It also explains the 2011 findings by researchers at the Face Research Laboratory at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. Subjects were asked to rate smiling and attractiveness. They found that both men and women were more attracted to images of people who made eye contact and smiled than those who did not. (Stevenson)

As briefly mentioned, eye contact too is an effective method in fostering human connection. Forbes' "The Impact of Eye Contact" highlights that "Greater eye contact, especially in intervals lasting four to five seconds, almost always leads to greater liking" (Goman). With eyes often known as the window into another's soul, eye contact, as long as it's not too intense or prolonged, instills a sense of interest and fascination. This active listening guides one into feeling important, like the person you're talking to actually wants to be engaged in conversation.

The article continues this argument by making reference to a scientific observation in which 90 percent of complaints against doctors at a hospital had to do with poor eye contact being translated as a sign of "lack of caring". This can directly be linked to *Blink* in which

Gladwell discusses the reason why some doctors are sued for malpractice meanwhile others are not. Turns out that a vast majority of the time, it has to do with whether the patient feels cared for by their doctor. Gladwell explains, “In the end it comes down to a matter of respect, and the simplest way that respect is communicated is through tone of voice, and the most corrosive tone of voice that a doctor can assume is a dominant tone” (26).

As I initiated conversation with strangers in the streets of San Francisco, I was like the doctor. Because I was choosing whom to talk to and doing the approaching, I tried to exude all the confidence I could muster, all the while remaining mellow and nonchalant. Without realizing it, I followed the eight tips previously mentioned for making myself likeable. I leaned in, nodded, laughed, and smiled all in the effort of enveloping a friendly, open, and engaging persona. This act was all made easier because they didn't know anything about me other than what I chose to present them with.

In hindsight, the first couple I approached looked slightly uncomfortable and out of place, a sentiment I echoed. Perhaps this is why they became the subject of my attention. Meanwhile, the city was dormant, they too were quiet observers, living in their own bubble and watching the morning unfold itself. The woman had a shy smile coloring her face meanwhile her partner looked lost in thought.

The second man I talked to was in his early twenties. With a distinct sense of street style and a cigarette was pressed between his lips, he emanated mystery and encapsulated everything European. A perfected scowl sculpted his features: suave, confident, and effortless. As I hastily introduced myself, a curious smile tugged upon his lips. He introduced himself as Jon, a student that had just made the move from Germany.

That day I met over 16 people whom I briefly conversed with, every interaction pushing me further out of my comfort zone. The camera in my hands held the key to approaching whomever I wanted without feeling overly awkward. I loved this feeling of power, which then led me to photograph more strangers in Boston later that summer.

At first thought, it's simple to believe that whatever decision we make, however large or small, is our own. If I'm choosing between eating a pizza or a burger, whichever option I pick will be based upon what I *feel* like at the moment. If I become a journalist it's because it was my calling. Right?

For the most part, people are aware that not all of the decisions they make are conscious, but research exhibits that people do believe that if they think hard enough, they have the ability to track the events and access the factors leading up to that choice. Despite this illusion of

choice, psychologists have come to the consensus that the power of the unconscious exerts a powerful influence over our decisions.

In his TED Talk “Are we in control of our own decisions?” Dan Ariely explains one of the reasons why some countries have a higher organ donor participation rate. He claims that’s it’s not because of a country’s culture and ideologies, but because of the way the form at the DMV is designed. When a form instructs people to check the box if they want to participate in the organ donor program, a majority of people opt out—they don’t check the box. On the other hand, when the form instructs people to check the box if they *don’t* want to participate, people still don’t check the box, but this time they join.

An economist might suggest that this occurrence is related to the fact that the cost of lifting up a pencil and checking a box is not worth the outcome, but Ariely disagrees. He claims that people act in that manner not because it’s easy and they don’t care, but because the decision they’re being asked to make is complicated and demanding and they’re not sure what to make of it. “When it comes to us, we have such a feeling that we’re in the driver’s seat, such a feeling that we’re in control and we are making the decision, that it’s very hard to even accept the idea that we actually have an illusion of making a decision, rather than an actual decision.” In this case, the fact that people care and don’t know what to do makes it so that they pick whatever was

chosen for them in the first place. In *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell refers to such acts as ‘priming’ a subject.

Other factors that come into play when evaluating the decision making of the unconscious are psychological experiences linked to biological inheritance and genetics. Not long after Darwin introduced the world to his theory of evolution, another debate permeated the 20th century—the question of whether a person’s actions were determined by nurture or nature. In a study conducted by van Roekel in 2013, it was found that girls with a specific gene were more likely to feel isolated within the presence of hypercritical friends than girls who did not. These results suggest that the inner workings of the subconscious can also be largely determined by our biology.

This opens up the question, if a person’s actions are so broadly influenced by their genetics, something they have no control over, how much of their decisions can they be held accountable for? In the legal system for example, according to Stephen Cave of *The Atlantic*, the number of court cases that have blamed a defendant’s actions on their biological chemistry has more than doubled in the past few years.

One of the problems that arise once people acquire a more deterministic mindset, one that emphasizes the idea that all events, including human decisions, are ultimately determined by external causes, is that they become more careless. This sense of moral irresponsibility stems

from the belief they're not blameworthy for their actions because whatever happens is going to happen one way or another.

Psychologists Kathleen Vohs and Jonathan Schooler conducted an experiment asking one group of students to read about free will being an illusion and priming another group with a passage that was neutral on the topic. When asked to take a math test in which cheating was purposefully made easy, the group primed with free will being an illusion were more likely to take the bait and cheat. Vohs and Schooler's conclusion was that, "Doubting one's free will may undermine the sense of self as agent [...] or, perhaps, denying free will simply provides the ultimate excuse to behave as one likes." Additionally, other findings suggest that weaker belief in free will can also be tied to poor academic performance.

In "There's No Such Thing as Free Will," Stephen Cave poses the question, "If we increasingly see belief in free will as a delusion, what will happen to all those institutions that are based on it?" Our codes of ethics and democracy are founded on the belief that we as humans have the ability to choose between right and wrong. Christianity, for example, is grounded on moral liberty, or the strength to do good and reject evil. German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant disputed: "In law a man is guilty when he violates the rights of others. In ethics he is guilty if he only thinks of doing so." This claim argues that if we're not free to make our own decisions, then choosing the path to righteousness would be completely futile. The

American Dream too, the ideal that everybody should have an equal opportunity at achieving success, is based on free will and the ability to find good within yourself despite the odds being against you.

So do we indeed have free will or is everything pre-determined? Is there such thing as a sporadic decision? Is there and has there only ever been one path? None of our decisions are free of outer influences, just like everyone's opinions are saturated with bias. Nothing you think is yours is 100% your own, it's recycled and regurgitated property, but the belief that we're all spiraling toward an inevitable destiny is detrimental. As we search for both truth and peace of mind, balance is essential. Perhaps Obama put it best in *The Audacity of Hope*, when he articulated that American ideals are "are rooted in a basic optimism about life and a *faith* in free will" (66).

The select photographs below are ones shot that morning in San Francisco.



The first people I encountered, a couple from Switzerland.



A grandmother and her grandchildren on a trip from Pennsylvania, visiting their grandfather.





Amy Chiang and her family visiting from Taiwan.



Carlos and his sons, touring from Argentina, wait on the curve of a shopping mall. The eldest son serves as a translator to his family.



Born and raised in Germany, Jon moved to San Francisco in April to further his studies.





Joshua, a San Francisco native, strikes a pose, later telling me about his experience as a freelance artist.

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